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ABSTRACT

From September 1989 to August 1992, 151 intern-teachers participated in an alternative credential program to recruit, train, and support special education teachers in rural northeast California. Directed by California State University, Chico, in collaboration with school districts in its service area, the 2-year program was designed to alleviate the area's critical shortage of special education personnel. The program featured stipends for 51 participants, on-the-job training, pairing of each intern with a mentor teacher, coursework delivered over interactive instructional television, release time for interns to attend training and observation sessions, and supervision and support from university faculty. Annual participant evaluations of the program and other data were analyzed with regard to three major program objectives: teacher recruitment and retention; meeting the educational needs of the special educator; and reducing the hardships of obtaining a special education credential. As of August 1992, 72 special education positions in the area had been filled by program graduates or participants. Participant comments indicate that over 80 percent: (1) had entered the training primarily from a desire to help children; (2) were satisfied with their first year of teaching special education; and (3) expected to continue as special education teachers until retirement. Participants rated the program as effective to very effective, and expressed satisfaction with the support received from mentor teachers, principals, and colleagues. (SV)

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FINDING AND KEEPING THE BEST: Three Years of Progress in Recruiting & Retaining Special Education Teachers

Since Fall 1989, California State University, Chico, (CSU, Chico) in collaboration with school districts in its 33,000 square mile service area, has successfully directed an internship program that recruits, prepares and supports special education teachers in northeastern California.

The program was designed to alleviate the area's critical special education personnel shortage. This on-the-job training program encourages interns to complete a Learning Handicapped Specialist credential while they teach and live in their rural communities. To date, fifty-one candidates have received stipends, thirty-five of whom have earned their Learning Handicapped Specialist credentials and continue to teach in Northeastern California. An additional one hundred "non-stipend" special education credential candidates have completed the program. During 1992-93, twenty candidates received stipends to pursue their coursework to attain Learning Handicapped Specialist credentials while they too teach and live in their rural communities.

THE PROGRAM

This two year alternative special education credential program consists of:

- The recruitment of qualified candidates from among successful regular classroom teachers, re-entry students, and graduates of the basic credential program.
- On-the-job training of candidates working on their Learning Handicapped Specialist Credential.
- A full week preservice orientation on the CSU, Chico campus.
- The pairing of each intern with a mentor teacher, trained to observe the intern and provide local support.
- Coursework throughout the year delivered over instructional television to locations in the candidate's local counties.
- Release time to attend training and support sessions, and to observe other special education teachers in their classrooms, and
- Observation, supervision, and support provided by University faculty and supervisors.

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FINDINGS TO DATE

Between September 1, 1989, and August 31, 1992, fifty-one candidates participated in *Finding and Keeping the Best*, the alternative credential program designed to recruit, train and support quality candidates to teach in special education classrooms in twelve rural and isolated northeastern California counties. Throughout the three years of operation, the program and its course offerings were evaluated. The results were utilized to make improvements in the overall program, individual courses, and evaluation instruments. The evaluations assisted program personnel in understanding how better to meet the needs of the candidates and areas served.

Evaluation questionnaires were administered to all course enrollees and analyzed by program and advisory personnel throughout the three years of program operations. Findings related to the three major program objectives follow --

Objective 1: Reduce the severe and long-standing shortage of fully and appropriately trained teachers of the learning handicapped.

Over three years, fifty-one interns have been recruited through joint University-public school efforts, to become a part of the Special Education Internship Program. Qualified candidates were sought from successful regular classroom teachers, re-entry students, and graduates of the basic credential program. Regular classroom experience with mainstreamed exceptional children was particularly valued in applicants. To maximize the chances of their long-term commitment to the rural regions, qualified residents of these areas were recruited. As of August 1992, thirty-five fully credentialed special education teachers have emerged from this two-year internship program and are currently teaching in rural northern California. An additional thirty-seven special education positions are filled by qualified individuals who are working toward the credential through on-the-job training and support. These positions were previously filled by short-term emergency credential holders, with little or no training in special education.

As credentialed teachers have emerged from the program and the number of qualified individuals teaching as interns has increased, the number of special education teachers teaching on emergency credentials has significantly decreased. In the late 1980's, when this program began, university program faculty were required to supervise over thirty emergency credentialed teachers, and by 1992, that number was down to fourteen. Long-term substitute teachers once prevalent are now almost non-existent in the CSU, Chico service area.

RECRUITMENT

Quality recruitment is the first step in reducing the severe and long-standing shortage of fully and appropriately trained teachers of the learning handicapped. Selecting qualified candidates with experience and commitment to the population to be served, and who will continue to teach in the area was the primary objective.

On an average, interns recruited to receive stipends entered the internship program with more teaching experience than the typical special education emergency credential trainee. In the three years, interns entered the program with over five years of regular classroom experience (range: 0 to 25 years) and over two years of special education classroom experience. In each succeeding year, the number of years of regular education experience of enrollees has increased, from a little over three years in 1989, to almost seven years in 1991, indicating that more seasoned teachers are being attracted to the program. Regular special education students during these three years maintained an average of three years of regular education teaching experience (range: 0 to 12 years).

RETENTION

Commitment to the profession and reasons for entering the profession are significant indicators of those who will remain in the profession. On a zero to seven point scale, with zero signifying no commitment and seven signifying extreme commitment, the average intern showed a very strong commitment to teaching special education children, with an average response of 6.2 on a seven point scale.

When asked why they chose to become special education teachers, the reasons given support the interns' internal commitment level. The top four reasons were:

#1 Personally satisfying job
#2 Like to make a difference in children's lives
#3 Opportunity to help young people with disabilities
#4 Opportunity to see growth in individual students

Incentives In order to further understand the interns' level of commitment to the profession and to special education children, interns were asked about incentives. Specifically they were asked how much the stipend, release time, the opportunity to work on a Masters Degree, and the support to be provided in the internship program were incentives for entering the special education profession. On a zero to seven point scale (*not at all* to *a great deal*), interns indicated that none of these really made a difference to them (Range: 2.7 to 4.1). The main incentive for entering the profession was written in as "an other" by approximately 80% of the intern population -- *the opportunity to work and make a difference with this population of kids so they will have a shot at success in life!* The results of the question follow:

Stipend	*2.7*
Release Time	*3.5*
Masters	*3.5*
Support	*4.1*
Other	*6.0*

Interns indicated an internal motivator was their main incentive to entering the profession. One-third of the interns indicated, however, that if this program had not been available, they would neither have entered, nor been able to enter a special education credential program.

Satisfying First Year The satisfaction experienced in their first year of teaching, is an indicator of longevity in teaching. All interns completing the program in 1992 indicated that they were highly satisfied with teaching in special education, even though one-third indicated that teaching special education was different from what they expected.

Expected Number of Years of Teaching Almost 90% of the "Finding and Keeping" interns responded that they expected to remain in the profession until their retirements.

Projections Even though *Finding and Keeping the Best* has increased the number of qualified individuals to teach the learning handicapped in northeastern California, the program must continue to produce qualified individuals in order to meet the projected need for teachers of the learning handicapped in the next five years. The twelve northeastern counties served by this program project that they will need three hundred twenty-two new teachers of the learning handicapped by 1996 (47 in 1992-93; 51 in 1993-94; 61 in 1994-95; and 70 in 1995-96) to meet the needs of the increasing learning handicapped population.)

OBJECTIVE 2: Provide program offerings to serve better the needs of the special educator.

Providing a quality program that meets the needs of the special educator is a major key to reducing the severe and long-standing shortage of fully and appropriately trained teachers of the learning handicapped in northeastern California.

By providing coursework to interns as they are learning on the job, combined with the support and observation of local mentor teachers linked to the University supervision, *Finding and Keeping the Best* has proven how to meet the needs of its interns.

PROGRAM OFFERINGS

Because some interns live up to six hours away from campus, various modes of delivery have been instituted to improve the accessibility of coursework. Delivery modes included interactive televised instruction, use of a northern regional training site for evening classes, week day sessions on release days, weekend courses in three regional sites, and summer sessions.

In August, 1990, the first summer preservice session was held with new interns selected for the 1990-91 program. The pre-employment orientation consisted of three days and evenings of training that focused on "intern survival skills." The orientation successfully built a cadre of interns, motivated their early success, and equipped them with beginning knowledge of handicapping conditions, classroom management, legal requirements of IEPs and initial instructional planning. As the orientation concluded, interns began to work with their University and local supporting teachers, thus initiating the link to on-the-job supervision and support structures.

LOCAL SUPPORT, SUPERVISION AND OBSERVATION

Currently practicing special education teachers, professionals experiencing similar conditions in their classrooms, were trained to mentor and to assist with the training of the interns. Additionally the mentoring component of the program gave experienced teachers a career ladder and a boost in their professional careers.

Interns were asked what kind of assistance they expected to receive from their mentor teachers as they began the program. Consistently, the interns expected mentor teachers to provide assistance in the rank order shown in Table 3.

Table 3
Rank Order and Percentage of Responses to
Expected Support from Mentor Teachers

Rank	% Responses	Expectations for Support
1	93	Observation and provide feedback
2	83	Provide guidance
3	80	Assist with curriculum issues
3	80	Provide friendship
5	70	Assistance with required, legal paperwork
5	70	Support
7	67	Role Model
8	50	Assistance with classroom management
9	47	School's and district's procedures

Once they were in the program receiving support from their mentor teachers, interns were asked in what ways the mentors were in fact most helpful. Results appear in Table 4, on the next page.

Table 4
Rank Order and Percentage of Responses to
Mentor Teacher Helpfulness

Rank	% Responses	Helpfulness of Mentor Teachers
1	87	Friendship
2	67	Support
3	63	Observation and feedback
4	60	Guidance
5	47	Role Model
5	47	School's and district's procedures
7	43	Assist with curriculum issues
8	37	Assistance with required, legal paperwork
9	27	Assistance with classroom management

In addition to their assigned mentor teachers, interns sought support from other special education teachers, experienced teachers, their principals, district and county program specialists, and fellow interns. Almost half of the interns sought assistance when they needed it between 76 and 100% of the time in their first few months. Thirty-seven percent of the interns sought assistance less than half of the time they needed it in their first few months.

University Supervision University supervisors have worked diligently to link their supervision to the instruction and field support through regular feedback sessions of candidates, and local support teachers, a program that meets the needs of the interns has evolved.

Overall Program Effectiveness Throughout the program, interns were asked to provide feedback on program effectiveness. The most recent effectiveness ratings appear in Table 5. (The scale: O to 7; 0 = not all effective, and 7 = extremely effective.)

Table 5
Interns' Ratings of Overall Effectiveness of the
1991-92 Special Education Internship Program

	First Year	End of Program
overall	5.62	5.93
in building your confidence in teaching	5.31	6.07
in providing you with the skills to become an effective special education classroom teacher	5.50	5.60
in providing instruction to meet the special needs of your classroom	5.62	4.92
in providing a support structure for you	6.08	6.00
in providing you with quality university instructors	5.77	5.71
in providing you with quality university supervisors	5.85	5.93

OBJECTIVE 3: Greatly reduce the personal, professional and geographic hardships of obtaining a special education credential.

Support at both the local and university levels, the summer and Saturday coursework, and the interactive televised instruction have served to reduce the personal, professional and geographic hardships of obtaining a special education credential in northeastern California. Over one-third of the interns indicated in the program evaluation that they never could have obtained a special education credential under the traditional structure that would have required them to attend courses on the CSU, Chico campus. According to the special education interns, the special attention to and support for the needs of rural teachers was one of the main factors that led them to enroll in *Finding and Keeping the Best.*

The California State University, Chico special education internship program has greatly reduced the feelings of hardship and isolation that once dominated the thoughts of credential candidates, and that at one time kept them from pursuing specialist credentials.

Interns stated that the most satisfying aspect of the program was the friendships that developed and the collaboration with the other interns -- they always felt there was someone to talk with who knew exactly what they were experiencing. The number two most satisfying aspect of the special education internship program was a related response. The interns appreciated the support of their local supervisors and university instructors. With support everywhere they turned, they knew they could always find someone to talk with about any problem or concern they were having. They particularly liked writing in their journals and receiving feedback from the instructor within three days. The interns always felt supported, encouraged and motivated to produce quality in their classrooms.

In general comments, the interns acknowledged the program for providing prompt assistance with the "usual hassles" of working with a University. These University hassles often keep students from enrolling in programs -- no one wants to fight the bureaucracy, especially from long distance. The Graduate school and the special education program worked with the interns to enroll and register the total group, greatly reducing one large, personal, professional, and geographic hardship for the interns. For this and all other aspects of the program, the interns are grateful.

SUMMARY

Finding and Keeping the Best has made significant accomplishments in its first three years of operation. Program administrators studied the needs of their service area and found that qualified special education teachers were sorely needed. With the help of the special education administrators and professionals already serving in the area, they were able to collaboratively design a program that would meet the personal, professional and intellectual needs of the soon-to-be special education teachers, the students that were typically being taught by individuals without special training, and the special education teachers already serving in these areas.

This program with its combination of superb local mentoring, outstanding support and instruction from university instructors has proven that it is not only possible to meet the needs of special education teachers in isolated, rural areas, it is as beneficial to the university as it is to the service area. With the win-win-win approach, the program will always be in demand.